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ABSTRACT

Most people understand the importance of school choice when it comes to higher educational opportunities, but until the 1990s, those very people did not understand the importance of school choice at the elementary and secondary level frequently because they felt they had no choice. The school choice movement, which started in Minnesota but which has begun to sweep across the nation, highlights both the importance and the availability of school choice. When combined with the large number of relocating corporate employees who have a choice regarding their place of residence and those that have a choice of private schools, the school choice issue becomes an important one for corporate human resource professionals. The results of thousands of parent responses to SchoolMatch family profile questionnaires indicate that parents do not necessarily look for "biggest" and "best" when given a chance to choose their children's schools. In fact, few parents want their children in the most academically rigorous school or the one with the highest test scores; instead, they want their children in an environment that allows each child to excel. The questionnaire results show that parents prefer school systems in which teacher salaries are competitive but not necessarily among the highest. Further, family-oriented communities appear to be important to parents. (KM)

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HELPING FAMILIES COPE WITH SCHOOL CHOICES

by

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Work & Family Conference
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American children spend the vast majority of their waking hours in schools. Consequently, it's not surprising that a large number of the parenting problems which confront corporate employees are school related. Many of these problems are the result of poor choices of public and private schools for children.

Most people understand the importance of school choice when it comes to higher educational opportunities. Until the 1990s, most people did not understand the importance of school choice at the elementary and secondary level frequently because they felt they had no choice. The "school choice movement" which started in Minnesota and is now moving across the nation highlights both the importance and availability of school choice.

Over a decade ago, Nobel prize winning economist Milton Friedman and his wife Rose, in their book, Free to Choose, devoted a chapter to the subject "What's Wrong with our Schools?" Their solution, "a voucher plan for elementary and secondary schooling," stirred controversy among school professionals. The basic concept was relatively simple. The Friedmans and others argued that parents should have the right to select a public school system for their children. According to this argument, introducing market forces into public education would begin curing some major problems that everyone agrees handicap the system. Forced to compete for students, schools would likely:

* Adopt more efficient management techniques, including trimming bloated school bureaucracies.
* Offer better pay and promotions to teachers who do a good job, thus providing a performance incentive that is imply not now in existence.
* Respond more quickly to technological changes and other forces that affect the curriculum.

As the third annual Bureau of National Affairs Work & Family

Conference convenes, school choice has become an important legislative issue in nearly half of the states. Arkansas, Iowa and Nebraska have followed Minnesota in initiating statewide choice and legislation has been passed or is pending in an additional 22 states. One interesting piece of evidence documenting the momentum which the school choice movement has generated comes from the politically oriented "think tanks." On most domestic policy issues, Washington's Brookings Institute and Heritage Foundation seem to come down on opposite sides, frequently being branded by the news media as liberal and conservative, respectively. In this debate, however, both Brookings and Heritage have, possibly for different reasons, taken the pro school choice stand.

When this movement is combined with the large number of relocating corporate employees who have a choice regarding their place of residence and those that have a choice of private schools, the issue becomes an important one for corporate human resource professionals. As in the areas of insurance, childcare and eldercare forward thinking human resource departments have accepted the responsibility of providing accurate information through which employees can make intelligent choices. Such information can help attract and retain key employees, reduce family objectives to the employment situation, boost morale, and reduce recruitment and retraining costs.

Our recently published Prentice-Hall/ARCO SchoolMatch Guide to Public Schools outlines a number of issues which corporations and parents should consider when choosing schools. For the purpose of today's meeting, I would like to focus on two important but often misunderstood issues regarding school information and school choice. The first centers on the types of schools which parents want for their children and the second revolves around the number of school options in various parts of the country.

WHAT KINDS OF SCHOOLS DO PARENTS WANT?

During the spring of 1989, my colleague Steve Sundre and I were asked by the National School Boards Association to develop a report for their American School Board Journal on what parents want from their schools. At a time of increased population mobility and a push for school choice, more parents want the right to select the schools their children will attend. You might be surprised to learn what they are looking for. We were when we summarized the results of thousands of parent responses to our SchoolMatch family profile questionnaires. Our firm maintains a database on school systems across the U.S. and provides information on local schools to corporations and families relocating in specific areas. Parents, we've discovered, don't necessarily look for the "biggest" and "best" when they have a chance to choose their children's schools - and they don't necessarily agree on what constitutes "best," either.

Hardly a week goes by that we don't get calls from school administrators or private school admissions directors suggesting we recommend their school systems to the XYZ corporation which is opening a branch office in the region. We admire these callers' marketing sensitivity and their initiative, but they lose us when they say, "Of course you know we have the best schools in the tri county area..."

The underlying premise of these calls seems to be that everyone knows how to define "best" when it comes to school systems or private schools. But our experience with thousands of relocating families and hundreds of corporations leads us to conclude otherwise.

For one thing, many school officials, realtors and even corporate managers equate "best" with "most competitive." Our own experience as administrators probably would have led us to the same conclusion. But in fact, few parents want their children in the most academically rigorous school or the one with the highest test scores.

Instead, they want their children in an environment that allows each child to excell. In particular, they want their child to be successful.

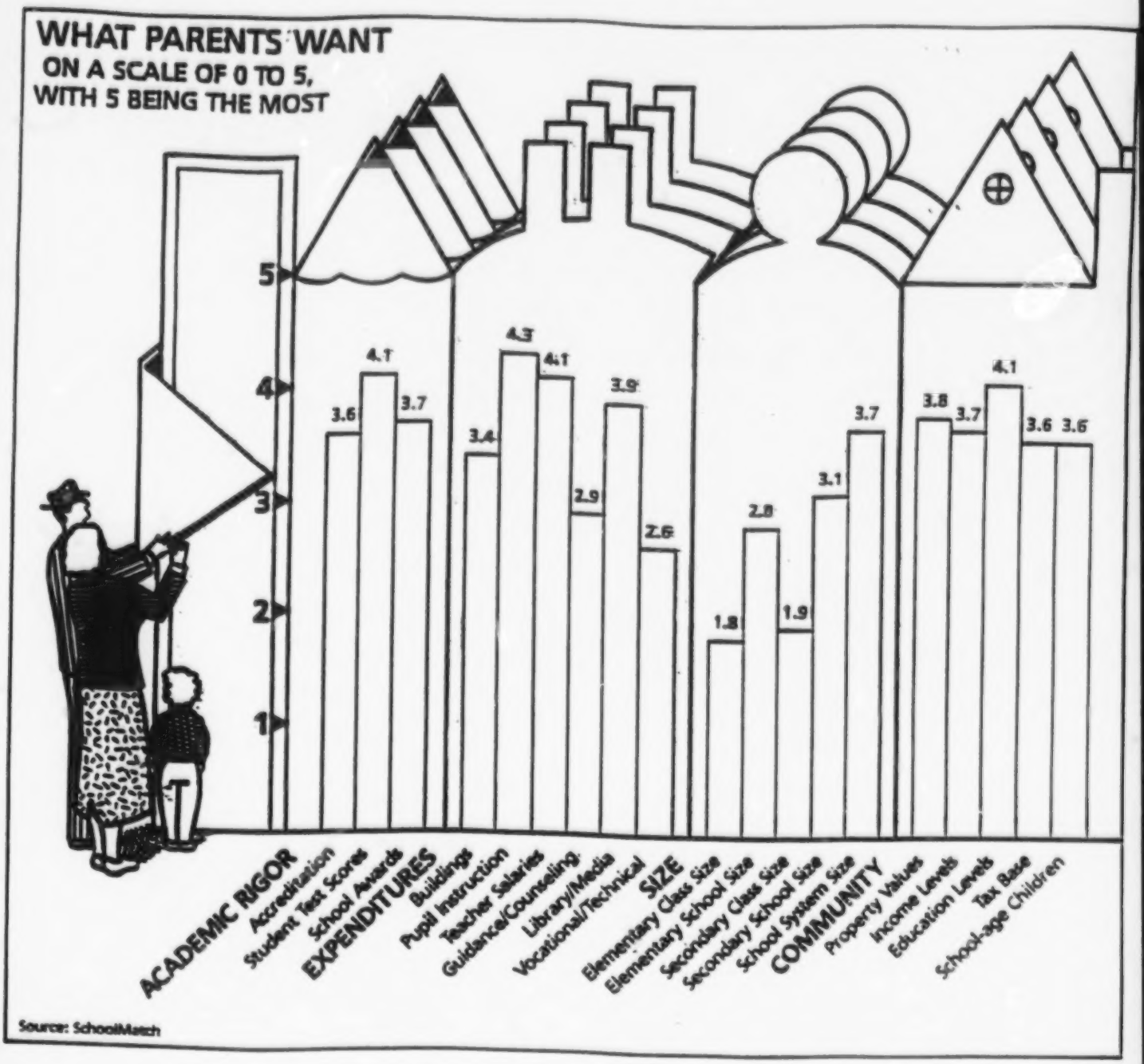
In our ongoing SchoolMatch surveys, we found that a majority of parents (53 percent) say they want a school system or private school in the second highest range (from the 60th percentile to the 80th percentile) on composite scores on scholastic examinations. Surprisingly, almost seven out of ten (69 percent) of the parents we've surveyed say the best school for their child is one that is "average" to "above average" in pupil performance on scholarship examinations.

Less than one-third say they want their child in a top-scoring (81st percentile and above) school system or private school. In fact, asked what's most important to them in choosing a school system more parents (40 percent) selected instructional expenditures than high test scores (30 percent) as their highest priority.

The message seems to be simple but not often understood: It is more important to parents that their children be successful than that the school earn the highest marks.

Likewise, biggest doesn't equate with best - although administrators often send us slick brochures about their school systems that make that assumption. It's common for such literature to tout a specific school system as "the third largest in the metropolitan area" or "the second largest in the state" - as though size were a qualitative measure and not a quantitative one.

According to our surveys of parents and corporations, people rarely look for extremely large school systems - or extremely small ones either. They might choose such systems because of other attributes, but extreme size isn't what they're after. Parents avoid very large or very small school systems. Less than one percent prefer "very small" systems, and only 1.6 percent look for "very large" systems.


WHAT PARENTS WANT
ON A SCALE OF 0 TO 5,
WITH 5 BEING THE MOST
5
4
3
2
1
3.6
4.1
3.7
3.4
4.3
4.1
2.9
3.9
2.6
1.8
2.8
1.9
3.1
3.7
3.8
3.7
4.1
3.6
3.6
ACADEMIC RIGOR
Accreditation
Student Test Scores
School Awards
EXPENDITURES
Buildings
Pupil Instruction
Teacher Salaries
Guidance/Counseling
Library/Media
Vocational/Technical
SIZE
Elementary Class Size
Elementary School Size
Secondary Class Size
Secondary School Size
School System Size
COMMUNITY
Property Values
Income Levels
Education Levels
Tax Base
School-age Children
Source: SchoolMatch

What does earn high marks among the parents we've surveyed is shown, in part, on the graph which appeared in the May 29th, 1990 issue of USA Today. We asked respondents to express their preferences on various factors such as academic rigor, expenditures, size, and community characteristics - in terms of their importance in selecting a school system. Analysis of their responses shows these findings:

* Class size matters - sometimes. Although parents of elementary and secondary students alike rated class size as just under two on our one-to-five scale, it turns out they believe different sizes are appropriate at different ages.

Average class size varies widely from state to state and school system to school system. So on our surveys, we provide the U.S. averages: 19.3 students per teacher in elementary school classes and 17.9 students per teacher in secondary school classes. Using these national averages as benchmarks, parents tell us what they're looking for. And 61 percent of the parents we've surveyed say that for elementary school youngsters, they prefer "small" or "very small" classes - that is, classes of considerably fewer than 19 students. By contrast, 56 percent say average size classes - 17 or 18 students - are suitable for junior and senior high school students.

* School size is an issue which is often misunderstood. Like the school choice issue, most people understand the major impact which school size can have in a college or university setting. When choosing an elementary or secondary school parents need to be educated to look at size. There are significant differences between large and small schools. School buildings with large numbers of students, for example, provide some advantages in terms of breadth of course offerings and extracurricular opportunities. Small schools, on the other hand, offer greater opportunity for participation and personalized attention.

* Parents want school systems in which teacher salaries are competitive but not necessarily among the highest. On a scale of one to five with five being the highest salary, 62 percent of parents select a four. Only approximately 20 percent select the highest category.

* Family oriented communities appear to be important to parents. Only three percent of parents say they are looking for a community where there are fewer school-age children than average.

* Exemplary school facilities, outstanding guidance and counseling services, and strong vocational education programs don't appear to be important to many parents, most of whom say average is good enough in these areas. But 68 percent say elementary school accreditation is important or very important.

Just as no two children are identical, no two families have the same definition of an ideal school system.

THE LARGE NUMBER OF SCHOOL OPTIONS

One of the most renowned communication experts of all time, Walter Lippman, wrote in his benchmark publication, Public Opinion, that reality is the "images in our heads." What is real is as much a function of perception as it is fact.

In the territory that encompasses southern New Hampshire and northeastern Massachusetts there exists a widely-held perception of the school systems in the two states and it goes something like this: If you live in New Hampshire, you can save money on housing and taxes but you will sacrifice on quality education.

This public perception creates a tough dilemma. It is almost a "do you still beat your wife?" kind of situation.

In this case the question is: "Which is more important? Your children's education or your own pocketbook?" Obviously, for most families, both of these questions are important.

Rather than selecting a home site in one area because "the living costs are more reasonable" versus another area because "the schools are better," a family can have the best of both worlds. It can find a good school system in New Hampshire where the cost of living is perceived to be less than in Massachusetts. It can also find a "good school system" in parts of Massachusetts where housing and taxes are reasonable.

In most of this country, as the chart illustrates, the number of school system and private school options available to a family is staggeringly high. There is no reason to discount any area without a thorough examination. To either include or exclude an area based upon its publicly perceived reputation can be a big mistake. Within any area exceptions to the rule proliferate.

In order to provide a real life example of our contention we reviewed a SchoolMatch search for a family in the Lowell, Massachusetts area. With SchoolMatch, which contains twenty-two different variables of information about each of the 15,889 public school systems throughout the United States, we were able to scan the entire Lowell area in search of school systems that matched up with family preferences on each of these twenty-two variables. Within a 45 mile radius of Lowell, there are 121 school systems from which to choose.

In completing this particular SchoolMatch family profile questionnaire, the family in question said they preferred to live in a small school system that paid its teachers well, was academically rigorous, and had a low pupil teacher ratio, but that was in an area where the cost of living was not high. Several other factors are included in the questionnaire, but these were the ones that were most important to this family moving into the Lowell area.

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PUBLIC SCHOOL SYSTEMS AND PRIVATE SCHOOLS BY METROPOLITAN AREA

Examples

METROPOLITAN AREA	PUBLIC SCHOOL SYSTEMS	PRIVATE SCHOOLS
Albany, NY	84	92
Albuquerque, NM	05	19
Atlanta, GA	19	50
Baltimore, MD	13	282
Birmingham, AL	15	25
Boise, ID	15	12
Boston, MA	201	344
Buffalo, NY	50	150
Charlotte, NC	13	20
Charleston, SC	04	15
Chicago, IL	267	688
Cincinnati, OH	79	167
Cleveland, OH	91	233
Columbus, OH	53	60
Dallas, TX	62	103
Denver, CO	23	74
Des Moines, IA	43	24
Detroit, MI	93	273
Duluth, MN	13	10
Erie, PA	24	37
Hartford, CT	133	203
Honolulu, HI	01	51
Houston, TX	33	94
Indianapolis, IN	50	59
Jackson, MS	10	35
Jacksonville, FL	03	30
Kansas City, MO	57	87
Las Vegas, NV	01	10
Little Rock, AR	28	21

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Indianapolis, IN	50	59
Jackson, MS	10	35
Jacksonville, FL	03	30
Kansas City, MO	57	87
Las Vegas, NV	01	10
Little Rock, AR	28	21

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Relocation Journal monitored this test and reported that "the SchoolMatch profile report of the school districts within 45 miles that best matched the family's requirements is enlightening, and explicitly illustrates the point. Of the 121 school system options, New Hampshire and Massachusetts were both represented in the top 15 school system matches. In this particular case, Hollis and Londenderry, New Hampshire both matched up well with the preferences on this sample profile. Several school systems in Massachusetts also matched up well with the family's desire to live in an area where the living costs were not out of sight. They include Ipswich and Framingham, among others. For another family, the choices and results would have revealed other school districts."

As with an individual, a school system's personality is multidimensional. The size of the school system, the scope of the curriculum, the opportunity for personalized instruction, the socioeconomic makeup of the community in which the school system is located, the cost of living in the area, the accessibility to services that meet specialized family needs, and the academic rigor of the school system are just a few of the factors that determine the personality of a school system.

A good school system for one family may not be a good school for another. The same pertains to private schools. Our database of over 7,000 private schools has shown similar results. Quality education and family lifestyle preferences are inextricably intertwined. If a family relies on published test scores (which usually are not comparable from school to school) and public reputation as the primary guide to finding the right school system or private school, it limits itself to a small number of potential choices and, in turn, may be disappointed because other needs are not met.

The point of all this is that through an interactive system it is possible to help the family find what it wants. Just as every proverbial hastack has at least one needle, every area, irrespective of what the public perception may be, has at least one school system or private school that will match up well with a family's lifestyle needs.

Large numbers of corporations are currently providing school information to their employees through their benefits programs. The cost is small and the rewards are significant.